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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

FROM CHARGE TO INL A/S POWELL AND WHA A/S SHANNON
STATE FOR INL, WHA, S/CT, PM, EB, AND INR
STATE PASS AID FOR LAC/CAM

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SUBJECT: COUNTERNARCOTICS BATTLE IN HONDURAS: GOH POLITICAL
WILL NEEDS USG RESOURCES TO SUSTAIN EFFECTIVE EFFORT

¶11. (SBU) Summary: Recent maritime interdictions, air radar tracks, and drug seizures, along with corroborated source information, indicate that Honduras has become a significant transit point for narcotics destined for the United States. There is evidence of the existence of an illicit trade in "arms for drugs," with arms from these deals presumably destined for use by terrorist groups in Colombia, including the FARC. Honduran President Ricardo Maduro acknowledges that narcotraffickers control major sections of the remote Mosquitia region and northern coastal sectors. All political parties and the media identify narco violence as a major threat to Honduras, and it has been an issue in the upcoming November 27 national elections. President Maduro believes that youth gangs have taken over illegal drug distribution within the country. Narco crime undermines progress being made against Honduras' most serious issue - corruption. As the narco threat has intensified, Central American nations have engaged in unprecedented cooperation to jointly attack narcotrafficking. DEA, the U.S. military (SOUTHCOM, JIATF-South, and TAT), DHS (Customs, Coast Guard), State/INL, and other U.S. agencies have successfully coordinated with Honduran anti-drug counterparts, but additional resources are needed to stem the drug flow. Most importantly, the Country Team encourages additional maritime patrol aircraft, support for Honduran response capability, continued development of human intelligence, as well as sustained INL funding to strengthen collection of evidence, the role of the prosecutors, and money laundering investigations. End Summary.

The Drug Flow

¶12. (SBU) Every 72 hours, 1,500 kilos of cocaine departs South America destined to Honduras or through Honduran air/sea space. In the first three quarters of CY05, JIATF-South received reliable information of 159 suspect boats transiting or landing in Honduras, carrying an estimated 188 metric tons of cocaine. However, only a few of these suspect boats were ever actually detected. Sporadic stationing of DHS Customs CHET aircraft in northern Honduras has helped to monitor suspect aircraft located by JIATF-South in numerous air trackings, including the September 28 spotting of a cocaine-laden aircraft which was successfully intercepted when it landed in Guatemala. The Coast Guard has had several significant successes in international waters near Honduras, intercepting the Honduran flagged vessel Ocean Mistery netting 3,137 kilos of cocaine in June; the Sunset yielding 3,623 kilos of cocaine in August; and the Miss Yolani carrying 1,400 kilos of cocaine in September. These are the boats that were intercepted; the vast majority escapes due to lack of detection capability (mainly maritime patrol aircraft) and/or sufficient resources to direct and sustain the interdiction capability (patrol boats/helicopters).

¶13. (SBU) As Honduras comes to grips with gangs and common criminals, politicians note an explosion of drug-related crimes in its major cities, most notably Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula. President Ricardo Maduro claimed in an Associate Press interview on September 15 that gangs had already taken over drug distribution in Honduras and that gang members had graduated from using small homemade weapons to employing high powered semi-automatic weapons. The murder rate - one of the highest in the world - had been diminishing somewhat, but narco-related killings have definitely increased. In a private discussion with the Charge, President Maduro mentioned his personal concern over death threats issued by narcotics - perhaps including the escaped murderer of the president's son. Senior GOH officials have also expressed concern over the illicit trade in "arms for drugs," with arms from these deals presumably destined for use by terrorist groups in Colombia, including the FARC. Three Hondurans were arrested on March 20 suspecting of aiding the FARC, and in April the GOH seized weapons believed to be destined for the FARC.

U.S. Operations

14. (SBU) Uniting Central American nations and Mexico in a common fight against narcotrafficking, DEA, the U.S. military, and other U.S. agencies conducted Operation All Inclusive from August 5 - October 8, 2005. The massive land, air and sea effort resulted in the seizure of the following:

Cocaine: 43.63 metric tons
Heroin: 88.56 kilograms
Marijuana: 27.69 metric tons
Designer drugs: approximately 1 million tablets
Currency: foreign currency equivalent to USD 7,551,687
Weapons: 104
Arrests: 346

15. (SBU) Among the most significant achievements resulting from Operation All Inclusive:

- largest cocaine seizure ever (2,376 kilos) in Belize,
- largest currency seizure ever (USD 1.2 million) in Nicaragua,
- culmination of the first judicially approved wire intercept in Honduras which provided intelligence on trafficker reactions and adaptations,
- first successful suspect aircraft interdiction and seizure of 430 kilos of cocaine in Guatemala since September 2003,
- significant currency and drug seizures in Panama - over USD 5,700,000 allegedly destined for Colombia and over 3.9 metric tons of cocaine being stored in a warehouse for later transport north by go-fast vessels, and
- 21 metric tons of marijuana seizure in a Mexico road interdiction operation.

16. (SBU) As part of Operation All Inclusive, and a preview of the GOH's planned to attempt to "retake" the vast Mosquitia region of Honduras (rumored to be scheduled in the next several weeks), Honduran police and military units supported by U.S. agencies launched a coordinated land and sea operation in September. There was some confusion between military and police elements, logistical shortfalls, and general inexperience. However, the mission netted some arms, drugs, and property. The exercise also demonstrated strong political will, a genuine desire to collaborate between Honduran and Nicaraguan military and law enforcement personnel, and the exercise forced traffickers to change their methods of operating. The operation pinpointed narco strongholds, heavily defended by criminal elements. A follow-up, better-organized operation has already been planned in the near term.

17. (SBU) The above results, including the cooperation between Honduras and Nicaragua on the Mosquitia region and the tracking of a drug air shipment over Honduras and Belize and into Guatemala, demonstrate that the Central Americans are not only united under CAFTA, but they share a common interest in combating illegal narcotics. Further evidence of this comes from the Honduran-proposed creation of a joint Central American strike force.

18. (SBU) The Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) program in Honduras amounts to roughly one million dollars annually, though the amount of funding is under stress due to budget constraints. Under INL, the mission has been able to support the DEA vetted unit, provide training and equipment for various criminal investigations, develop strong organized crime and anti-corruption units, administer polygraph tests to various police and prosecutorial units, enhance money laundering institutions and personnel, provide logistical support (fuel, food, supplies) for units involved with the Mosquitia and other operations, and much more. In a country where the judicial system has been fundamentally broken by corruption, INL and USAID have complemented each other in building a more effective judicial process. Notably, Honduras is the first country in Central America to allow bilateral use of judicially approved telephone intercepts. This is a milestone because the evidence that is obtained from these intercepts can be used in U.S. courts.

19. (SBU) DEA, TAT, MILGP, and U.S. military elements - Joint Task Force-Bravo (JTF-B) - based at Soto Cano Air Base near Comayagua, Honduras, have provided badly needed training, planning, and logistical support in numerous anti-drug operations. Although Honduras has political will, it lacks basic air transport and basic intelligence. SOUTHCOM assets have effectively inserted Honduran personnel into operational areas and DEA has provided necessary intel to Honduran operatives to effect arrests. This effort, however, is jeopardized by budget constraints in all agencies.

110. (SBU) MILGP has secured SOUTHCOM end of year funding to purchase a 6,000 gallon mobile refueling system for the Mosquitia. The Bryant Fuel System will be transported using U.S. sealift assets earmarked to move New Horizon Exercise

equipment from Jacksonville, Florida to La Ceiba on Honduras' Caribbean coast in January 2006. MILGP has conducted preliminary coordination with JTF-B to sling load the refueling system via CH-47 helicopter from La Ceiba to Mocoron in the Mosquitia. A Forward Air Refueling Point (FARP) capability in Mocoron will significantly enhance future counternarcotics operations in the Mosquitia and reduce Honduran Air Force dependency on U.S. airlift assets. However, there is no current USG assistance available for purchasing fuel for the FARP, and absent USG fuel purchases, the GOH will struggle greatly to find resources to buy fuel.

Honduran Political Will

¶11. (SBU) In meetings with the Embassy, the key campaign leaders for both presidential candidates in the November 27 elections have made it clear that they want to continue the fight against drugs and corruption and that they will look to the U.S. for the technical assistance to get the job done. The current President, Ricardo Maduro, tells us that he fears the loss of the Mosquitia and wants to engage the narcos head-on. In various meetings with the leading press - from all political spectrums - there is widespread fear that narco violence is gripping the country and effective measures need to be taken. The ruling National Party has already told us that popular - and iron-fisted - Minister of Public Security Oscar Alvarez will remain as Minister if the Nationals win the presidential election.

¶12. (SBU) In a meeting with the Charge on October 17, highly respected Roman Catholic Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez expressed dismay over the growing narco-trafficking threat to Honduras. Practically rising out of his chair, the Cardinal proclaimed narcotics as the most serious problem in Honduras. The Cardinal said that narco cartels had established a grip over parts of the second largest city of San Pedro Sula and were dominating the entire Mosquitia region. He stated that a Honduran drug cartel had ordered a hit against a Honduran in Colombia last year. Two years ago, the Cardinal visited the Mosquitia and received warnings from a congregation to refrain from speaking out against the narcos. He spoke out anyway and received numerous threats. The phone lines had to be changed where the Cardinal was residing. Cardinal Rodriguez noted numerous narco mansions in the area, relayed the fears of parishioners, and referred to narco flights and boat movements in the region. The Cardinal also attributed an explosion in street crime in San Pedro Sula to narcotrafficking and requested U.S. assistance in fighting drugs. The Cardinal maintained that the country has the will to combat narco traffickers, but seriously lacks the resources to be effective.

The Way Ahead

¶13. (SBU) Honduras needs maritime patrol aircraft to spot fast-boats transiting, refueling, or landing on its shores. Through JIATF-South, U.S. Customs, and the U.S. military have provided occasional maritime patrol aircraft, but they are not enough. If the GOH had better detection and monitoring assets to locate suspect drug boats, Honduras could more effectively use its limited naval capacity to intercept such maritime traffic. Further, Honduras needs the continued support of INL in its investigations, judicial reform, anti-money laundering training, and other law enforcement programs. The INL program could easily be expanded to include culture of lawfulness training and other programs in an anti-corruption effort. DEA's role remains critical and the resources to support its vetted unit, phone intercept program, and human intelligence efforts must continue. There is a new threat to Central America and its leaders have received the message that they must collaborate to control narcotrafficking - or narcotrafficking will control them. If they succeed, America benefits.

¶14. (SBU) The Country Team notes that continued cooperation among U.S. agencies as described above is required. Furthermore, Post emphasizes again that additional INL funding is required in order for the GOH to sustain and strengthen the ability to attack and dismantle the ever present Colombian and Mexican drug trafficking organizations that are utilizing Honduras as a transshipment point in furtherance of their criminal enterprise with the U.S. as the endgame. Assistance to the Public Ministry's Organized Crime Unit and the Frontier Police to investigate and prosecute those narcotrafficking cartels, including for money laundering, is a critical part of this strategy.

¶15. (SBU) Post believes that INL's immediate support is needed in order to bolster the GOH ability's to quickly react to actionable information that is generated by USG assets. Post encourages additional U.S. maritime and air interdiction in conjunction with the support for the Honduran response capability, including La Ceiba on the

Caribbean coast as an informal counternarcotics forward staging area. This support should include, but not be limited to, fuel and other assistance for the Honduran Navy and Air Force response, rations (MREs), and marine band communications equipment for response teams comprised of combined Honduran law enforcement and military entities. Additionally, the Country Team recognizes that continued development of the GOH's ability to conduct proactive and multi-facet criminal investigations must be focused not only on attacking the structure of the counternarcotics organizations, but also on stripping the illicit assets gained as a result of the criminal activities.

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